

Connector Road Clears EPA Review

*Md. Project Is on Track
For '06 Construction Start*

By STEVEN GINSBERG
Washington Post Staff Writer

The intercounty connector, a suburban Maryland highway 50 years in the making, moved a significant step closer to a 2006 construction start yesterday when the federal government declared the project environmentally sound.

The decision comes about eight years after the Environmental Protection Agency rejected the highway in 1997 over concerns that the project would destroy parkland and wetlands, disrupt migratory birds and threaten a spawning area for brown trout.

The next and last approval for the project could come in the spring, when the federal government makes its final determination on the highway after a public comment period. If the project gets the go-ahead, which state officials said they expect, the state will begin buying land and houses along the route and putting out bids for construction.

In addition to bringing the first major highway to the Washington region in a generation, the approval, announced by the Federal Highway Administration, is also a boost to the political fortunes of Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R), who faces reelection in November four years after making construction of the road a campaign promise.

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"This means we are on track to fulfill Governor Ehrlich's commitment to start construction of the intercounty connector later this year," said Maryland Transportation Secretary Robert L. Flanagan.

The 18-mile toll road would be one of the most expensive transportation projects in the region, with a price tag of \$2.4 billion that could rise to \$3 billion after financing costs.

A route for the six-lane highway was announced in July and would cut through a mixture of parkland and residential communities between the Interstate 270 and Interstate 95 corridors — in Montgomery and Prince George's counties, respectively.

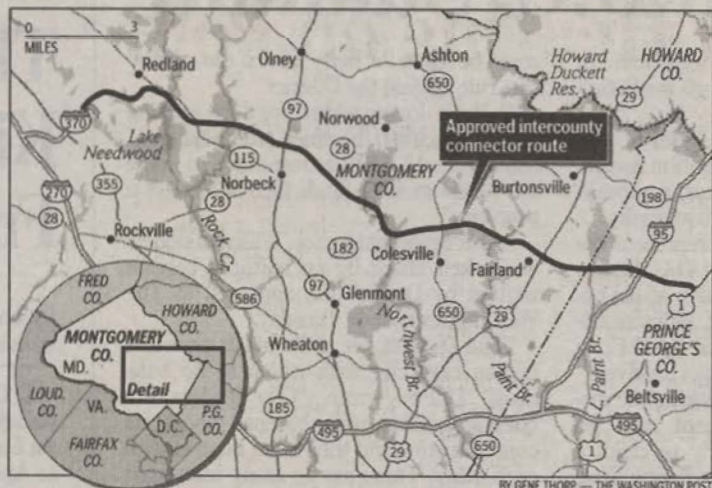
Opponents contend that the project would harm the environment. In 1999, then-Gov. Parris N. Glendening (D) canceled a highway study, citing environmental concerns.

State officials said they have made changes to address those concerns since a draft of the review was released in November 2004. Those include removing access ramps from Old Columbia Pike near the Avonshire Community, creating eight acres of parkland for every acre affected, increasing storm-water management controls and reducing the impact on waterways and forest habitat.

State officials also said they would consider building a pedestrian crossing to ease disruption to the Longmead community.

The state government, which is responsible for releasing the 2,700-page federal document, has not yet done so. Maryland officials said it was finalized late Monday night, and they need until the end of the week to make copies and to post the review on a Web site.

Opponents said yesterday that they were frustrated that they didn't have the report in hand



BY GENE THORP — THE WASHINGTON POST

and promised to highlight potential problems when it becomes public.

"Whatever it is we say, the state can just say it's perfect and fine and every problem is fixed," said Brian Henry of the Audubon Naturalist Society. "There's nothing we can say back to that because we haven't even seen the report yet."

Opponents of the project said they spotted many concerns in the draft released more than a year ago, including the project's cost, the limited traffic relief it would provide and what they said was a biased and faulty economic analysis.

They also contend that the process was rigged, because the Bush administration put it on a fast track in 2003. "The EPA has ruled on this before," Henry said. "The only difference now is we have a Bush EPA, which says something different."

Federal officials have said they are satisfied with Maryland's plans to address environmental concerns by building bridges over sensitive areas, using advanced technology to manage storm-water runoff and narrowing the road in places. State officials have also said they would spend \$262 million to make environmental improvements around

the highway.

Montgomery County Council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville) said yesterday that regardless of the report's details, the process was flawed.

"Any study such as this one that considers only one alternative to relieving east-west congestion, and the only alternative is an expensive toll highway, is at best incomplete and at worst bogus," he said.

Many also said that the public should be given at least three months to comment on the final environmental review because of its complexity. A spokesman for the Federal Highway Administration said the comment period was extended from the normal 30 days to 45 days because of the controversial nature of the project.

Nonetheless, avenues for stopping the highway are narrowing. Aside from raising objections to the environmental report, opponents hope that state legislators will reject the price tag. If those options fail, opponents have promised to take legal action to stop construction.

"We do expect desperate opponents to file lawsuits to try to stop this, and we will be prepared to defend the decision," Flanagan

Intercounty Connector

The Highway The connector would be a six-lane, 18-mile-long toll road through a mixture of parkland and residential communities between the Interstate 270 and Interstate 95 corridors — in Montgomery and Prince George's counties, respectively.

History The highway has been discussed for a half-century. It would be one of the most expensive transportation project in the Washington region, costing \$3 billion, including financing charges.

What's New The Federal Highway Administration announced that a review has found the project to be environmentally sound. That's a major hurdle and one the project could not overcome during a review in the 1990s.

What's Next The federal government will make its final determination on the highway in the spring after a public comment period. If Maryland gets the go-ahead, it will begin buying land and houses along the route and putting out bids for construction.

said, adding that court action would not delay construction.

Other supporters were excited yesterday by the prospect of a new road in the Washington region.

"This would be the first major highway in a 25-year-plus time frame, and we're very pleased because it will improve mobility," said Bob Grow of the Greater Washington Board of Trade.